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**CLAUSEWITZ'S THEORY OF THE PARADOXICAL TRINITY  
AND THE US STRATEGY IN THE GULF WAR**

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Report Documentation Page				Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188	
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1. REPORT DATE <b>1998</b>		2. REPORT TYPE		3. DATES COVERED <b>00-00-1998 to 00-00-1998</b>	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE <b>Clausewitz's theory of the Paradoxical Trinity and the US Strategy in the Gulf War</b>				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S)				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) <b>National War College, 300 5th Avenue, Fort Lesley J. McNair, Washington, DC, 20319-6000</b>				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT <b>Approved for public release; distribution unlimited</b>					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT <b>see report</b>					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT	18. NUMBER OF PAGES <b>12</b>	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT <b>unclassified</b>	b. ABSTRACT <b>unclassified</b>	c. THIS PAGE <b>unclassified</b>			

## CLAUSEWITZ'S THEORY OF THE PARADOXICAL TRINITY AND THE US STRATEGY IN THE GULF WAR

"If at first you don't succeed, try, try again" some would say the U S grand strategy since World War II is best summed up in that anonymous quote The three times a charm approach appears to have worked for the US in reviewing the track record of Korea, Vietnam, and Persian Gulf Wars What makes the Persian Gulf War a success? Victory is vital to our nation's stature in the international arena, and Americans believe we must win the wars we fight "War is an act of force to compel our enemy to do our will," a clash of opposing wills,<sup>1</sup> and "blood is the price of victory,"<sup>2</sup> so says Carl von Clausewitz, a famed 19<sup>th</sup> century military theorist and author of *On War* The Korean and Vietnam wars exacted a high price in wounded, missing, prisoners of war and killed in action, and changed the way Americans view war A basic tenet of Clausewitz, "war is merely the continuation of policy by other means,"<sup>3</sup> highlights the importance of the political object over the glory of war How governments develop grand strategy using the instruments of statecraft is key to a nation's survival The proper balanced relationship between the government, military and people are vital to developing sound strategy during preparations for war and the execution of war This balanced relationship is also key to understanding the foundation and interaction of politics and military affairs The desired end state is the goal, "the object in war is a better state of peace--even if only from your own point of view"<sup>4</sup> Yet, in our quest for an end state of our design, we must remember that "in war the result is never final"<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Carl Von Clausewitz, *On War* (Princeton, N J Princeton University Press, 1989), 75

<sup>2</sup> B H Liddell Hart, *Strategy, 2<sup>nd</sup> Revised Edition* (New York, N Y Penguin Group, 1991) 324 (A quote Hart attributes as fundamental to understanding Clausewitz)

<sup>3</sup> Clausewitz, 87

Carl von Clausewitz's theory of the paradoxical trinity is a timeless theory relevant in modern conflicts and war as evidenced by this analysis of the U S strategy in the Gulf War In this paper, I will analyze the U S strategy in the Gulf War (Desert Shield/Desert Storm) proving the timeless applicability of Clausewitz's theory of the paradoxical trinity <sup>6</sup> I will define and discuss the three parts of the trinity, and then discuss the salient points of U S strategy and actions during the Persian Gulf War to support Clausewitz's ageless concept This paper is a discussion of a 19<sup>th</sup> century theory as it was applied to a modern war, and is not a dissection of the Persian Gulf War political and military strategies, or military tactics

Clausewitz's theory of the paradoxical trinity the government, the commander and his army (the military), and the people are relevant and are followed in modern conflicts and war Clausewitz describes aspects of his paradoxical trinity as follows

These three tendencies are like three different codes of law, deep-rooted in their subject and yet variable in their relationship to one another A theory that ignores any of them or seeks to fix an arbitrary relationship between them would conflict with reality to such an extent that for this reason alone it would be totally useless Our task therefore is to develop a theory that maintains a balance between these three tendencies, like an object suspended between three magnets <sup>7</sup>

The trinity is like a three legged stool, all three of the legs government, military and the people are indispensable If one leg is missing or shorter than the other, the stool is not functional

The purpose and means of war are found in the trinity The government defines the political purpose, the military the instrument or means to achieve the political goal, and the people provide

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<sup>4</sup> Hart, 338

<sup>5</sup> Clausewitz, 80

<sup>6</sup> Ibid , 89

<sup>7</sup> Ibid , 89

the “will ” All three components are essential to Clausewitz’s strategic concept The U S government through the ingenious application of Clausewitz’s trinity theory played a pivotal role in orchestrating the outcome of the Persian Gulf War

On 2 August 1990, when Saddam Hussein ordered his forces to invade Kuwait, he ignited a controversy that shocked the world The reasons for the Iraqi invasion involved financial problems for the government of Iraq The Iraqi government had a debt repayment of \$90 Billion from the cost to finance the Iran-Iraq War The price per barrel of oil (\$14) was low due to the Sabah family (Kuwait) selling above their cartel imposed limit Saddam Hussein wanted \$25 per barrel of oil The tremendous increase in the price of oil would have caused a financial crisis for many governments The U S did not want another oil crisis like it had experienced in the 1970s The U S pre-Iraq invasion regional goals were assuring adequate supplies of oil at reasonable prices, maintaining regional stability, survival of Israel, and achieving an Arab-Israeli peace settlement <sup>8</sup>

The U S grand strategy involved the use of all the instruments of statecraft in response to the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait As Clausewitz stated, the political object is the goal, and war is the means of reaching it “The political objective will determine the military objective to be reached and the amount of effort it requires ”<sup>9</sup> Therefore, observing this important Clausewitz concept, the U S political objectives in the region were clearly stated immediate, complete and unconditional withdrawal of Iraqi forces from Kuwait, restoration of Kuwait’s legitimate

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<sup>8</sup> Bard E O’Neill, and Ilana Kass, “The Persian Gulf War A Political-Military Assessment,” *Comparative Strategies*, Volume II 1992 United Kingdom, 216

<sup>9</sup> Clausewitz, 80-81

government, security and stability of Saudi Arabia and the Persian Gulf, and safety and protection of the lives of American citizens abroad <sup>10</sup>

The U S swiftly responded to the crisis by carefully working all aspects of the trinity, to ensure the proper balance. On the military front, within one hour after the invasion of Kuwait, the U S government ordered the USS Independence battle group to move from Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean to the Gulf of Oman. The USS Dwight D Eisenhower battle group was also ordered to sail to the eastern Mediterranean Sea in preparation for entering the Red Sea <sup>11</sup>. On the political front, the U S moved with equal speed in obtaining international support with Security Council Resolution 660 on 2 August 1990, and condemned the invasion and demanded immediate and unconditional withdrawal of Iraqi forces. Working with equal diligence to shore up public opinion, the President and his advisors carefully worked the media, to retail their plan of action and gain public support.

President Bush also worked hard to establish a coalition to impose economic sanctions on 6 August 1990, and a naval embargo on 25 August 1990 against Iraq. On the diplomatic front, the U S dispatched Secretary of Defense Cheney, accompanied by General Schwarzkopf, Commander, U S Central Command for a meeting to consult with King Fahd of Saudi Arabia. They discussed the commitment of the U S to provide forces to help defend Saudi Arabia from Iraqi military forces posed at the northern border of the kingdom. Secretary Cheney convinced King Fahd that Iraq posed a threat to the vital interests of both the U S and Saudi Arabia <sup>12</sup>. Thus

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<sup>10</sup> O'Neill and Kass, 219

<sup>11</sup> U S Congress House Final Report *Conduct of the Persian Gulf War*, April 1992 Washington D C , GPO, 1992, 19

<sup>12</sup> U S Congress, 20

action underscores Clausewitz's observation, "political aims are the business of government"<sup>13</sup> As political actions escalated in the international arena, it was clear, that "war is nothing but the continuation of policy with other means"<sup>14</sup>

Clausewitz contends that politics is the only source of war, and war is an instrument He is also emphatic that the military point of view is subordinate to the political<sup>15</sup> "No one starts a war--or rather, no one in his right mind ought to do so--without first being clear in his mind what he intends to achieve by that war, and how he intends to conduct it"<sup>16</sup> The political objective that could be accomplished by the military instrument of power was the immediate, complete, and unconditional withdrawal of all Iraqi forces from Kuwait

"The political object--the original motive for the war--will thus determine both the military objective to be reached and the amount of effort it requires"<sup>17</sup> "Sometimes the political and military objective are the same"<sup>18</sup> "The first, the supreme, the most far-reaching act of judgment that the statesman and commander have to make is to establish by that test the kind of war on which they are embarking"<sup>19</sup> Although war was different in Clausewitz's time, and technology changed the way wars are waged, the need for well defined political objectives remains essential since military objectives are derived from them The military objectives for Desert Storm were

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<sup>13</sup> Clausewitz 89

<sup>14</sup> Ibid , 69

<sup>15</sup> Ibid , 607,608

<sup>16</sup> Ibid , 579

<sup>17</sup> Ibid , 81

<sup>18</sup> Ibid , 81

Neutralization of Iraqi National Command Authority's ability to direct military operations, Ejection of Iraqi forces from Kuwait and destruction of Iraq's offensive threat to the region, Destruction of known nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons production and delivery capability, to include Iraq's known ballistic missile program, and Assistance in the restoration of the legitimate government of Kuwait<sup>20</sup>

Clearly stated political and military objectives allowed the U S to forge a coalition comprised of over 50 nations Under U S leadership, the coalition went to war with limited objectives Many historians will argue that Iraq fought a total or absolute war However, both Iraq and the coalition possessed nuclear weapons and neither used them Also, Iraq possessed chemical weapons, and we believed they were not used Both sides showed restraint and seemed to wage limited war

Clausewitz believed the commander and his army should be concerned with the conduct of the war During the Persian Gulf War, President Bush recognized the military leadership, had faith in their abilities, and gave them a "free" military hand to conduct the war The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Powell was a capable general, well versed in the political arena His understanding of the way political policies were formed in Washington was key to the smooth relationship between the military and political leaders This close working relationship is the epitome of what Clausewitz expected from the statesman and the general The President and his advisors sought and accepted the recommendations of the military commanders

At the termination of hostilities, President Bush commented that once and for all, the U S had licked the Vietnam Syndrome General Schwarzkopf, the Commander of U S Central Command, later recognized President Bush for giving him what Clausewitz believed an imperative, the ability to advise and make recommendations to the statesman, and to be concerned

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<sup>19</sup> Clausewitz, 88



with “fighting” or executing the war. Unlike Vietnam, there was no member of the executive branch of government calling in military strikes or determining targets.

Since the U.S. government clearly articulated the military objectives, and ensured they remained subordinate to the political objectives, Clausewitz was again proven correct in his assessments. The use of military force to compel an enemy to do our will resulted in the ability to clearly win wars. A properly balanced trinity will also garner the public support necessary for a nation state to wage war.

The national will is defined by a nation’s citizenry, and is key to the support needed to wage war and win. In the Persian Gulf War, the “will” of the people affected the nature of war, and what was acceptable in terms of fighting. “When whole communities go to war--whole peoples, and especially civilized peoples--the reason always lies in some political situation, and the occasion is always due to some political object.”<sup>21</sup> This point was made clear to the American public by the government.

Most Americans had an opinion on two distinct areas that would impact the way generals planned to “win” the Persian Gulf War. One was to avoid a prolonged Vietnam-style war, rather they wanted a short, decisive war. Americans seemed unwilling to accept the cost in men, resources and material to support a protracted war. The other important area of concern was American casualties. Although, the government had clearly articulated the vital interests of the U.S. were threatened by Iraq, many citizens were not willing to accept high casualties. Perhaps, the sight of flag draped caskets from the Beirut bombing was still fresh in their minds, but

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<sup>20</sup> O’Neill and Kass, 224

<sup>21</sup> Clausewitz, 87

nonetheless, this single factor proved to drive both military planners and politicians to ensure every precaution was taken to minimize U S casualties

In the Persian Gulf War, domestic and international political considerations were consistent with sound military objectives. This link resulted in tremendous public support for the use of military force<sup>22</sup>

The media played a vital role in building public opinion, a contribution unmatched in any previous war or conflict. A small example will help visualize the magnitude of the impression they made in this crisis. Peter Arnett and Bernard Shaw, CNN correspondents, from their vantage point in the Al Rashid Hotel in downtown Baghdad, beamed the sights and sounds of the start of Gulf War “live” around the world. In homes across America, their CNN report, “War in the Gulf,” confirmed our worst fears. The U S led coalition was at war with Iraq. From that moment on, the world was treated to a front row seat at press briefings from CENTCOM to trips throughout the theater of operations.

However, the American public’s journey began long before that January 1991 broadcast. Recognizing the power of the media, and some lessons learned from Vietnam, the U S government established media rules of engagement during the Persian Gulf War. These controls of the media invited controversy. The media screamed censorship, the military countered citing military necessity. The public simply accepted both arguments, and were focused on the Persian Gulf War. Cleverly using Clausewitz’s trinity concept during the Persian Gulf War, the U S government cultivated the American population first to gain public support, then built a national

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<sup>22</sup> O’Neill and Kass, 226

consensus on U S involvement in the war, which culminated when they galvanized the support into the national will

The national will was solidly behind the deployed troops in the Gulf due to the shrewd use of the political instrument of power, by securing both international support and conviction that U S actions were not only right but also justified. The “will” of the people clearly supported the deployment of troops to the Gulf War. The support was felt personally by the deployed troops from favorable television coverage of their mission, to “care packages, and cards and letters” addressed to any U S serviceman or woman, from the homes of the heartland of America. Americans also supported the mobilization of the Reserve Forces and National Guard.

Close adherence to Carl von Clausewitz’s theory of the paradoxical trinity in the U S strategy during the Gulf War resulted in a swift resolution of the war, few American casualties and clear victory for the US. The balanced relationship and interaction of key players of the government, military and the people ensured a successful outcome for the U S and the coalition. Clausewitz’s theory of the paradoxical trinity is a timeless theory relevant in modern conflicts and war as evidenced by an analysis of the U S strategy in the Gulf War provided in this paper.

Again, Clausewitz’s 19<sup>th</sup> century theories stand the test of time and are applicable today despite our high-technology equipment, modern communications, and sophisticated weapons systems. If modern day strategists understand both the complexity and simplicity of the paradoxical trinity theory, they will possess a vital “all-purpose tool” in their grand strategy tool box. The key to making Clausewitz’s paradoxical trinity theory applicable to war and war preparation is to understand his theory delineates a set of principles designed as a starting point in planning and waging war, rather than as a “how-to” or descriptive manual.

To proclaim Clausewitz a brilliant general and strategist is to invite a debate, but his well-established theories speak for his credibility and brilliance--they are simply classic theories predicated on common sense. We use his theories today even when we are not aware, or well-read enough to understand them to give him proper credit. Pick up any major newspaper and the headlines prove Clausewitz's theories are timeless--in the Washington Post on 4 October 1997, "*U S Dispatches Carrier Group to Persian Gulf*," and the Associated Press release on 10 October 1997, "*U S Tightens Iraq No-Fly Zone*." Clausewitz is on-target yet again with his observation, "in war the result is never final."<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Clausewitz, 80

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